

Professional Learning Communities Strand National Science Foundation Conference

What are the common, critical attributes of a successful Professional Learning Community (PLC) that supports quality teaching in science and mathematics? How do you measure the success of a PLC? Answers to these questions were probed by participants and facilitators at the December 2001 National Science Foundation conference during the Professional Learning Community strand.

Professional Learning Community Attributes

Before answering these questions, a working definition of a PLC was created. A PLC is not an end in itself or a part of another program, it is an infrastructure, or way of working together with a goal of increased student learning. A PLC results in continuous school inquiry and improvement.

What does a PLC look like? What is it characterized by? The five attributes of a Professional Learning Community are:

- Supportive and Shared Leadership
- Shared Values and Vision
- Collective Learning and Application of Learning
- Supportive Conditions
- Shared Personal Practice

Supportive and Shared Leadership

The leader of the community, often a principal, should nurture the PLC, and a collegial relationship must surround teachers, entailing the sharing of power, decision making and promoting and nurturing leadership development among staff.

Shared Values and Vision

A focus on student achievement should inform all decisions about teaching and learning and promote accountability for actions among stakeholders.

Collective Learning and Application of Learning

At all levels, the community works collaboratively to solve problems and improve learning opportunities. Together, they seek new knowledge and skills as well as apply their new learning to their work. There are expectations, even of the principal/leader, that everyone continues to be a lifelong learner.

Supportive Conditions

Physical conditions as well as personal and professional interactions support the work of school staff. Practical expectations such as room space and time are met, and trust and respect are honored among the adults in the school.

Shared Personal Practice

Teacher interaction occurs within a formalized structure to provide encouragement and feedback on instructional practices in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. When a supportive structure is part of the classroom process, student achievement is made possible.

Broadening the Notion of Community

The idea of the “community” needs to be thought of in broader, more inclusive terms. Where do we get our teachers? They are parents and community leaders who have a serious stake in education of young people. While they are not a direct part of professional development, parents and community leaders are paying the taxes to support the superintendent who should be promoting a PLC. They must be included and kept abreast of what is happening as they can be great supporters and activists for the cause.

For similar reasons, the idea of K-12 should be extended to encompass higher education (K-16) and business leaders. Normally, decisions about student progress and assessment are set up by the education community, but higher education and the workforce industry need their voices as stakeholders heard as well. After all, school is ultimately preparing students to be workforce or university competent. If students arrive ill-prepared, universities and employers must spend time and energy re-training and re-educating them.

Connecting with Universities

Approaching the higher education faculty to join a PLC requires certain steps and preparation. A needs assessment based on data must first be done (for more information, see Assessment below). It is challenging to partner with higher education when professors don't see the value of working with K-12. A “crisis need” in a community must occur before you can present your case to a university. They often need proof (i.e., the need to increase student education in mathematics as a result of the university's increase in remedial classes), a reason to partner, or a research piece that shows some value of this. Use your needs assessment to determine how they can best enhance your community. The PLC must engage all stakeholders and must have an incentive for everyone. Conditions and leadership must be created to provide the desired outcome.

Connecting with Businesses

Many of the same techniques of approach and crisis need presentation applies to recruiting the business community. Keep in mind that people on university boards are involved in big business. When university board members say they will not support the university if they are not supporting students K-12, then the university will listen. Part of the pressure to create an all encompassing PLC is economic-shared collegiality – we are moving toward a shared vision for students as a larger community vision. It must be a planned effort.

Issues Surrounding the Attainment of a Professional Learning Community

There are many issues preventing them from attaining a successful learning community. Money and time remain two of the top elements lacking in their community. One speaker, a high school principal, has dealt with both of these issues by using grant funds to provide all teachers with a one and a half hour conference period every day while employing substitute teachers to cover classes. Also, for school wide professional development activities always done during the school day, substitute teachers are used.

Teachers learning and working in isolation can be a problem if leaders do not promote communication and a collaborative environment. Structures need to be in place that allow for formal sharing for professional development learning – simply having professional development is not enough to make an impact on the entire PLC.

Another problem has been that the PLC itself was school centered and did not include stakeholders prior and following that particular school level. For example, middle school teachers must interact with peers in elementary school and high school to assure that preparedness and content are consistent. A PLC cannot exist in one only school but must be sustainable and include the district, the region, etc.

If not created in a collaborative way, supportive and shared leadership can be difficult. There are many leaders (i.e., teachers) – leadership is not just the job of superintendents and principals. In fact, many principals tend not to be instructional leaders. A good solution might be to create an inclusive leadership team. Give the team the support and authority they need to create a successful PLC.

Assessment

Assessment should happen at many stages. Before creating a plan to implement a PLC, the community should assess what needs work using various types of data as a learning tool instead of as an “I gotcha” tool. What information do you want to receive, and what do you want to do with it? With the plan in place, there should be constant evaluation by all stakeholders of how the program is affecting student achievement. Keep in mind that change does not happen overnight. In many cases, a few years are needed to see results.

How do you measure the critical attributes of a PLC? How do you know they lead to increased performance/learning? There are multiple measures you can use depending upon your situation. These include:

- Demographics
- Perceptions
- Student learning
- School processes

Demographics

Demographic data provides descriptive information about the school community -- enrollment, attendance, grade level, ethnicity, gender, and native language, for example. This data can be used to observe trends and for the purposes of prediction and planning.

Perceptions

Perceptions data reflects what students, parents, teachers, and others think about the learning environment. This can be gathered through questionnaires, interviews, surveys, focus groups, and observations. Often overlooked for their outlook on learning are students who should be involved in determining how successful their education is. Measurement can also be done by parent/teacher attitudinal surveys. With a shared sense of accountability, implementer self-policing or self-reporting and peer observation can also be added. For this type of assessment to occur, there must be a level of trust among teachers. Being a teacher is a profession, and your values and teaching methods reflect on the entire education community.

Student Learning

Assessment of student learning can involve standardized test results, grade point averages, standards assessments, and authentic assessments. Schools use a variety of these types of measurements—usually separately.

School Processes

Evaluating the processes that teachers go through in the classroom to get the results that they are getting are key to a well-rounded assessment. These include programs, instructional strategies, and classroom practices. Processes are often the hardest for teachers and others to describe, but, in order to institute change, these must be documented and aligned with the guiding principles of the school.

Conclusion

It is important to keep in mind that a Professional Learning Community is not created overnight. PLC systems that have worked in other situations are not templates; each community has vastly different issues to tackle. A PLC should include everyone that has a stake in childrens' education: parents, academic instructors, building-based administrators, business leaders, university faculty, and students. A common focus on what the goals of the program are as well as an agreed upon system of measurement help guide the community toward a common goal. Clear communication across levels, paying special attention to bridging the grade level, is essential to facilitate the PLC. Finally, a structure should be in place for each part of the program.

Speaker Highlight:

Principal Brett Springston from Spring Woods High School
Department of Education national award winner for staff development

Focused on these steps:

- Established student inclusion
- Developed positive attitude
- Engendered competence
- Enhanced meaning

Created a leadership cadre of teachers. Every teacher has 1.5 hours of a conference period. They have substitute teachers for staff development during the day. There is book study in which all teachers read and discuss one book a semester. Latest: "Zap in Education"

Keys to success;

- Collaboration

- Peer observation and feedback

- Teacher support

- Administrative support

To combat student absence, he and his staff call the parents of students. After 5 days, the police are sent to the students' home to give them a ticket.

For more information: <http://www.ed.gov/inits/teachers/98-99/springwoods.html>